



I. Zhdanov. 2000s. Photograph by A. Tyagny-Ryadno



Ars interpretandi

MOTIF OF WORLD TRANSFIGURATION IN IVAN ZHDANOV'S POEM ORANS* **

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In the works of the contemporary Russian poet Ivan Zhdanov, religious motifs, images, and ideas are intertwined with the philosophy of seeking answers to the 'eternal' questions of life and death, faith and breaking away from God, and good against evil. Referring to the analysis and interpretation of his most poignant poem *Orans*, the article demonstrates the author's metaphysical approach to the perception and transformation of the world and humanity. As in all Zhdanov's works, in this poem there are two worlds, i. e. the divine and the human, which the author strives to unify and transform. The poet considers love, hope, and forgiveness the fundamental way to reconfigure human experience, which is also apparent from the very title of the poem, *Orans*. This is a symbol of forgiveness, embodied in the person of the Mother of God, whom the author calls "hope for ultimate forgiveness". Themes of pain and suffering, an integral part of human existence, are intertwined in this poem, as well as among many others in the author's oeuvre. Elements of Christian axiology are among the main pillars of his artistic world, which is filled with a desire for spiritual revival. In addition to biblical motifs (the Archangel, the Last Judgment, etc.), we also observe reliance on the folk tradition of the Eastern Slavs (*Pokrov* Day or the Intercession of the Theotokos). In addition to decoding individual images, the article also pays attention to the poetic style, rhythmic composition, rhyme, and complex metamorphic language which make the poet a representative of metametaphorism/metarealism/neo-baroque. The relationship between the poet and memory, or poetic mission, plays an important role in the poem.

Keywords: modern Russian poetry; transformation of the world; metaphysics; *Orans*; Ivan Zhdanov.

Рассмотрено творчество современного русского поэта Ивана Жданова, в котором религиозные мотивы, образы и идеи переплетаются с философией поиска ответов на «вечные» вопросы жизни и смерти, веры и раз-

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рыва с Богом, добра и зла. На основе анализа и интерпретации его самого пронзительного стихотворения «Оранта» показан метафизический подход автора к восприятию и преобразению мира. В стихотворении присутствуют два мира – Божественный и человеческий, которые он пытается объединить и преобразить. Фундаментальным путем к преобразению поэт считает любовь, надежду, прощение, что в конечном счете вытекает из самого названия стихотворения. Оранта является символом прощения, олицетворенным в Божьей Матери – «надеждой на всепрощенье». Элементы христианской аксиологии становятся одними из главных столпов картины художественного мира поэта, наполненного желанием духовного возрождения человека. Мотивы боли и страдания представляют неотъемлемую часть его существования. Наряду с библейскими образами (Архангел, Страшный суд и т. д.), также важно обращение к народным традициям восточных славян (празднику Покрова). Кроме декодировки отдельных образов, уделяется внимание поэтологическим приемам, ритмической композиции, рифме и сложному метаметафорическому языку, благодаря которому данного поэта относят к представителям метаметафоризма/метареализма/необарокко. Важную роль в стихотворении играет вопрос отношений поэта и Памяти, или же поэтического наследия.

Ключевые слова: современная русская поэзия; преобразование мира; метафизика; «Оранта»; Иван Жданов.

Ivan Zhdanov is one of the most prominent and “difficult” modern Russian poets supporting the principles of metaphysics. His poetry is deep, serious, paradoxical and distinctly intellectual: it builds a multi-layered image of the world, seeking to convey the unity of all things. Turning to the poem *Orans*, we will read a poetic message based on a rethinking of religious images.

Questions of religion and faith often arise in Zhdanov’s interviews and essays. To a question from V. Polishchuk about whether modern poetry and Orthodoxy can be considered compatible, Zhdanov replied: “Speaking of Russian poetry, it can be said that it is inseparable from Orthodox consciousness, since these two layers are strongly interrelated. Not only was it born out of Orthodoxy itself, its roots are there.” [Полищук].¹ The poet reveals the reason for his repeated appeal to the beginning of things: “And in our time somehow the conditions were set in such a way that existence began to need some deep justification. That is, a person must go back to what preceded this being, in such plans as the unconscious, the mythological, and so on” [Тихонов]. In an interview with D. Baviľsky, he admits: “I believe in the immortality of the soul, therefore I have no doubt about the resurrection. I rather doubt that I will come into existence again like Vanekhka, with the ears and nose. Yet it does not interest me – since

¹ Hereinafter, the translations of Zhdanov’s poems and quotations from scholarly articles belongs to the paper’s author.

this is regarded as something transitory, it will pass" [Бавильский]. On the basis of what has been said, we can state that the poet does not doubt the existence of God. He perceives him as an unchanging and eternal essence. In contrast, he regards himself as a concrete subject who is a shaky and unstable being that belongs to a certain period of time. To the question of V. Tikhonov "What should a poet transfer if, as you say, he should be a conductor?" [Тихонов], Zhdanov answers, "What to transfer? What God commands must be transferred. Here everything is the same as always" [Там же]. Thus, according to Zhdanov, a poet is an intermediary between man and God. In these terms, the following question of V. Polishchuk is interesting, as it states whether it is possible to consider poetry, the search for feelings in words, as knowing God: Zhdanov answers: "If you take art seriously, sooner or later you will find out that it is connected with religion and knowledge of God. Let us take the work of any poet. What do we usually say? These poems are about love, these are about nature, and these are about creativity. But the poet does not have such a division. It's all about the same thing. This is a single process of knowing. You can call it knowledge, you can call it knowledge of God. It's like looking into the same well. Behind one infinity there is another, behind it – the third, etc. And there is no end to it either" [Полищук].

Zhdanov comments on the insertion of Christian images into modern poetry: "When I published my first book in 1982, there were big problems. I do not even understand how it was published. The editor of the book said that all the same censorship will take away my crosses and my God. But surprisingly, the word God was removed only in one place – where it was written with a capital letter. These and some other categories were necessary for me to generalize. Although from the perspective of an enlightened Orthodox, I surpassed myself. But this is not due to trends. I was interested in categories of sin, guilt, and their correlation. In the second book, *Неразменное небо* (*The Inconvertible Heaven*), I explored the category of relativism through my poetic possibilities. I was interested in why modern man does not have such clear contrasts as in the olden days or whether there is among modern believers truth – lies, light – darkness, good – evil. In modern man these concepts are blurred, so love, for example, is not opposed to hatred, but, let's say, jealousy. Something emotional, even everyday routine" [Там же].

In her dissertation *Метафизика всеединства в поэзии И. Жданова* (*The Metaphysics of Unity in Zhdanov's Poetry*), O. N. Merkulova comes to the conclusion that "in Zhdanov, the reconciliation of the world as history and the world as eternity takes place in the unique formula of suffering humanity" [Меркулова, с. 56]. In her opinion, Zhdanov describes the action-packed and intense process of transformation of the unity of the worlds in the spiritual act of suffering, which is understood as love, hope, forgiveness, and mercy. The researcher considers pain and suffering as a sign of the truth of existence in Zhdanov's poetry. The situation "together" is the essence of human existence as a human [Там же].



Cover of I. Zhdanov's *Air and Wind. Compositions and Photographs*. 2006

A detailed examination of Zhdanov as a poet of total unity is presented in the monograph of O. A. Dashevskaya *Мифотворчество В. Соловьева и соловьевский текст в поэзии XX века* (*V. Solovyov's Myth Creation and Solovyov's Text in 20th-Century Poetry*). She explains that Vladimir Solovyov entered the consciousness of Russian culture as the creator of the concept of God-manhood. He presented the evolution of the world as a "God-man process" and as the history of the reunion of man with God [Дашевская, с. 8]. The researcher writes: "Sophian God-manhood acquires from him the status of truth, goodness, and beauty thanks to the presence of the eternally feminine principle that affirms the perfection of the transformed cosmos" [Там же, с. 8–9]. Through the Virgin in the

poem *Orans*, there is transformation and forgiveness in order to achieve the purification of the soul, which, according to Dashevskaya, is the only way to embrace the world as a whole. At the same time, she comes to the conclusion that "in the work of Zhdanov Christian consciousness is not expressed, it can rather be called universalistic (extra- and over-confessional); and yet the ethical parameters (coordinates) of the contemporary spiritual world are set by generally accepted cultural and historical notions; Zhdanov's picture of the world is built up against the background and in connection (in dialogue) with Christian axiology, including it in itself as part of the spiritual experience of mankind" [Там же, с. 111].

Modern Russian researchers of Ivan Zhdanov's poetry pay attention to religious motives in his work. The fact that Zhdanov in his poetry continues in the line of Russian philosophical-religious thought stemming from Solovyov is a key point in N. S. Chizhov's dissertation *Поэзия Ивана Жданова: проблемы поэтики* – *The Poetry of Ivan Zhdanov: Problems of Poetics* [Чижов, с. 52]. The spiritual symbolism, spiritual realia and spiritual values intertwined in Zhdanov's are demonstrated in the theses of E. A. Knyazeva (*Материализм как направление: эстетические принципы и поэтика* – *Materialism as a Trend: Aesthetic Principles and Poetics*) and A. A. Tokarev (*Поэтика русского материализма* – *The Poetry of Russian Materialism*), as well as in the papers of S. M. Kozlova (*«Божественный младенец» в поэзии И. Ф. Жданова* – *"The Holy Child" in the Poetry of I. F. Zhdanov*), O. N. Zaytseva (*Концепция Божественного в творчестве Ивана Жданова* – *The Conception of the Divine in the Work of Ivan Zhdanov*) and others.

The title image (*Orans*) means “the one who is praying” and unites various iconographic images of the Mother of God, also known as Panagia (Most Holy), Great Panagia or Sign. *Orans* is a symbol of forgiveness in the face of the Mother of God, extending hands in prayer for the whole human race. It still remains one of the most common stories in Christian art [Божья Матерь Оранта].

The first stanzas of the poem go thus:

За звуковым барьером, в слоеном сугробе агоний
луна обтянута кожей молящей твоей ладони.
Здесь глушь затмевает глушь, ветвистую кровь круша,
здесь горсть как черенок упавшего навзничь ножа.
За звуковым барьером изгиб возвращенной стаи
очертит твое лицо колодцами лунных статуй,
тыходишь в каждый из них смертью моей и всех.
Тает морозный нерв – не выпускает страх... [Жданов, с. 88].

The long lines of the six-beat accentual verse sound solemn and mournful. Each line is divided by a caesura into a hemistich. In the first stanza, all the first (“left”) hemistichs draw a completely remote world – the soundless (За звуковым барьером/Beyond the sound barrier) moon, doubly “deaf” and with a flat face covered in leather, like the handle of a fallen knife. The second (“right”) hemistich transmits deadly suffering, the agony of man. Here the images are very visually concrete: puffy snowdrifts, a palm, a divaricated blood circulation system, and a knife. The double-repeated adverb of place “here” suggests that the dying person is almost beyond the earthly world, in a lifeless “lunar” world.

The second stanza, starting with the same word combination as the opening stanza (За звуковым барьером/Beyond the sound barrier), is a description of the Virgin. The metabol “...изгиб возвращенной стаи / очертит твое лицо колодцами лунных статуй” (...the arch of the returned flock / will delineate your face with the wells of the lunar statues) can be perceived as a halo shining above the head of the Mother of God. But it can also be interpreted that the Mother of God enters the moonbeams, the wells of death, death of “моей” (me), and “всех”. (all) The final line, “Тает морозный нерв – не выпускает страх” (The frosty nerve melts – does not release fear), is contrasted with the preceding ones by more intense intonation: together with the clear syntax, the monosyllabic words (нерв, страх) (nerve, fear) before the caesura and at the end of the line make up a total 12 syllables, whereas the number of syllables reached 13–16 in the previous lines.

Poetic motifs develop a movement from top to bottom, from the world of the lunar non-being (death) to the earth. The third stanza is the most poignant in the poem. It begins with an exclamation-appeal: “you” is first named as “Матерь скорбящая” (grieving Mother): she is “Память” (Memory), “вечное отраженье” (eternal reflection) and “надежда на всепрощенье” (hope for forgiveness).

Матерь скорбящая, Память, ты – вечное отраженье
 на гневной трубе Архангела, надежда на всепрощенье.
 Развяжешь верхнюю воду камерных длин бытия,
 на Покрова вернется тополиная свадьба твоя... [Жданов, с. 88].

If you look at the verb order (затмевает – круша – очертит – входишь – тает – не выпускает – развяжешь – вернется – обрattился – прошелестит – преобразится – простится – простится / eclipses – destroys – delineates – you enter – melts – does not release – you untie – returns – turned – whispers – turns into – forgives – forgives), the only two verbs in the second person of the singular immediately become visible, which helps the lyrical subject turn to the Virgin: “входишь” (you enter) and “развяжешь” (you untie), which signal calm and liberation. Thanks to the presence of the Mother of God, the wrathful trumpet of the Archangel announcing the Last Judgment appears to be pacified. The mentioned holiday is Pokrov Day, when in the folk tradition of the Eastern Slavs, the end of autumn and the beginning of winter was celebrated. From the point of view of etymology, it is connected with the first snowfall covering the earth, indicating the proximity of the cold winter [Агапкина, с. 127–128]. In addition, it also corresponds to the beginning of evening gatherings and the autumn wedding season: therefore, the word “wedding” is found in the line. The Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God – the omophorion – bestows liberation from enemies and protects life. Pokrov Day is a great Orthodox holiday celebrated by the Russian Orthodox Church. One can agree with the opinion of M. G. Milyutina and A. I. Milyutin (investigating this poem as ekphrasis), who state that “the text *на Покрова вернется тополиная свадьба твоя* (when the holiday of Protection of the Mother of God comes, your polar wedding returns) refers us to the icons of the Novgorod version of the Покров Пресвятой Богородицы (the Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God). In these images, as if in a section, the temple is represented, and under its arches the Mother of God is depicted in a prayerful pose” [Милютин, Милютин, p. 115]. V. N. Lossky and L. A. Uspensky explain the meaning of this icon the Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God in the following way: “In our icon the Mother of God is depicted as standing on a small cloud: she rises in the air above the crowd of believers. Dressed in Her ordinary maphori, she raises her hands in the Orans gesture, which expresses her prayerful intercession. The two angels hold a great veil over the ends, rising above it like a vault” [Лосский, Успенский, с. 229]. The icon of the Protection of the Blessed Virgin unites two worlds, heaven and earth.

In the third stanza, the soundless “глушь” (wilderness) is replaced by the sound of a pipe, densely compressed, hard “snowdrifts” are covered by poplar fluff (representing the soft first snow, waxing the earth on Pokrov Day), the lifeless cold is replaced by water, and “agony” is replaced by a “wedding”. The fourth stanza, which completes the poem, depicts the transformed world, the saved life:

Шепот ночной трубы на свету обратился в слово,
сфера прошелестит смальтой древесной славы,
кубических облаков преобразится взвесь.
Миру простится гнет. Небу простится высь [Жданов, с. 88].

Night's "тьма" (dark) is replaced by day's "свет" (light). An angry trumpet is heard in a whisper and then in the rustle of poplar foliage (смальты древесной) (wooden smalt). Milyutina and Milutin note that "in the iconographic tradition of the Mother of God, her clothing is filled by light: she is depicted as a large assistant, which is an expression of the streams of grace of the Holy Spirit poured upon the Blessed Virgin at the time of conception... In the mosaic icon *Нерушимая стена* (The Inviolable Wall) (Kiev, St Sophia Cathedral, 11th century), circles of light seem to pour onto the Mother of God, visually repeating and embodying the metaphorical image of wells of lunar statues [provided by] I. Zhdanov... The image of Orans (the Inviolable Wall) is unambiguously referenced by the line mentioned at the end of the poem: the sphere will whisper with the fame of wooden malt, as this is a mosaic icon" [Милютина, Милютин, с. 115]. We note, in turn, that Zhdanov does not literally reproduce the icon. He replaces "смальта" (smalt, pieces of opaque glass) with the living leaves of the tree (an archetype of the World Tree).

In the last stanza, we find the most important figures defining the composition in the icon, namely the circle (сфера/sphere) and the quadrilateral (кубические облака/cubic clouds). M. G. Davidova and E. Shlychkova argue that the geometric shapes in the icon have a theophanic meaning. In their opinion, the combination of a circle and a square (an oval and a rhombus) is a symbol of the union of the Divine and the human [Давидова, Шлычкова]. It can be assumed that Zhdanov strove to express this union, possibly due to the Mother of God's prayer from the heavenly world for the forgiveness of all the sins of the earthly, human world. The final line of the poem is rhythmically similar to the eighth line (Таёт морозный нерв – не выпускает страх / The frosty nerve melts, does not release fear), but has the opposite meaning, claiming total-unity: "Миру простится гнет. Небу простится высь" (The world will say goodbye to oppression. The world will say goodbye to skies).

* * *

Taking into account the opinions of other researchers, we will add that the grieving Mother in Zhdanov's poem not only "reconciles" earth and heaven, flesh and spirit, and Divine and human, but also gives poetry a role in the process. In one line, Zhdanov places the words "Память", "слово", and "слава" (Memory, word, and glory), while the woody foliage recalls those "leaves" on which the poem is written. The poet is, according to Zhdanov, a witness and keeper of the memory of the miraculous transformation of the world: the poetic word allows each reader to relive the difficult process

of winning compassion and love over sin and death. We have already noted the balanced rhythmic composition of the poem, in which four stanzas form two parts, mirroring and reflecting each other. The nature of rhyme attracts attention: a pair rhyme divides each quatrain in two and a caesura divides each line into hemistichs. The rhymes are inaccurate, but the resonance of the pre-accent sounds are rich: агоний – ладони, стаи – статуи, слово – славы, взвесь – ввысь (agonizing – palms, flocks – statues, word – glory, slurry – upwards). This rhyme is not “mechanical”, but emphasizes the difference in words that have a similar sound to make one listen and think. The “sound barrier” is overcome by the glory and prayer of the Virgin, recreating the transformation of the world by the word of the poet.

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